

The artist Linder Sterling on her classical influences

Unexpected oppositions and the beautiful, startling juxtaposition of images, the empowerment of women, and interrogation of desire: these are just some of the prevalent themes in the work of influential British artist and musician Linder Sterling. Esther Eidinow interviews her for *Omnibus*.

In 2018, Linder was artist in residence at the stately home Chatsworth, and her time there inspired her recent show 'The House of Fame' at the Nottingham Contemporary gallery. Esther Eidinow interviewed Linder for *Omnibus*, to ask how the Classical themes in Chatsworth's art influenced her work.

Linder Sterling is a radical, feminist artist. Her technique is photomontage: she sources popular images from magazines, slicing them out with a Swann-Morton surgeon's scalpel and glueing them to unexpected, often (but not always) pornographic, pictures. From the beginning of her career in the Manchester punk scene of the 1970s, her art has confronted and challenged the constraints of gender construction, in particular the ways in which sexuality and desire are shaped by capitalism and culture.

The stately home at Chatsworth might seem an odd place for such work, but that (of course) is part of the point. Chatsworth is the home of the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire, passed down through sixteen generations of the Cavendish family. Linder's time there coincided with the centenary of the Act of Representation of the People, which gave women over thirty the right to vote. With this in mind, her explorations of the house focused in particular on the women of the Cavendish family, including both the well-known Georgiana (1757–1806), and the late Duchess Deborah Devonshire, 'Debo', who died in 2014.

Linder's show at Chatsworth, entitled *Her Grace Land*, comprised four installations that explored the female voice. The title itself was a pun that referenced Debo's admiration for Elvis Presley, realized in the form of two giant vinyl capes, decorated with images of Elvis, positioned overlooking the balcony of Chatsworth's famous Painted Hall: a typically vivid Sterling juxtaposition.

Linder had worked with classicists while at Chatsworth, and, as she has acknowledged, these experiences have prompted her to see classical influences in

her own work. Across the intricate weave of objects and images that she had created in *The House of Fame*, the influence of ancient cultures was frequently apparent.

Sometimes these allusions to the ancient world were explicit. Linder's *Pythia* (whose title, of course, refers to the oracular priestess of Apollo at Delphi) is a mesmerizing montage (below), based on a close-up of Maria Cosway's famous portrait of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, but with her face engulfed by the coiled Chatsworth snake (above). In *Latona*, Lady Caroline Lamb is transformed into the goddess (Latona is the Latinized equivalent of Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis). Works by other artists in the show also directly reference the classical world: Madame Yevonde's portraits of socialites from the 1930s, dressed as Greek goddesses; or the terrifyingly captivating painting of Medusa by the female surrealist painter, Ithell Colquhoun.

But more subtle classical influences could also be traced. Linder's series *Pretty Girl* 1976, for example, depicts photos of nude glamour models, their heads merged with household objects, posed in domestic settings. These collaged images call to mind ancient Greek myths of metamorphosis – adapted for the modern world – while the carefully posed, perfect bodies suggest ancient statuary.

There was also a particularly pervasive 'mantic' theme of prophecy, with one gallery devoted to works referencing mediums, ectoplasm, and artistic inspiration from 'beyond'. In an alcove, the repeated image of Linder's *Pythia* presided regally, the coiled snake at its centre a reminder of the monster at the heart of the oracle...

I started by asking Linder about these themes and her relationship with antiquity.

Where do the classical influences in your work originate?

My connection with classical ideas starts

when I was nine, when we moved to a tiny village with a tiny school. The school library was very impoverished, it was simply three shelves of books in a teacher's cupboard. On reflection, I think that someone, a philanthropist of sorts, must have given the school a collection of Greco-Roman mythology books. That's all that I remember reading from the age of nine; I was in that world from the age of nine to eleven. I knew far more about the nuances of the life of Artemis when I was ten years old than I do now.

It all lies latent: and then it comes back through popular culture. All those received ideas come flooding back. During my six-month residency at Chatsworth, I spent a lot of time studying the painted walls and ceilings of the house, as well as looking at hundreds of paintings and sculptures in the collection. Many artists and sculptors focused on themes and subjects from classical mythology so that at times it felt as though Chatsworth was cloaked in one huge mythological code that I had to crack before it would let me in!

At times it was frustrating because there were so many layerings of allegory, code, and allusion... I had to dig deep into my memory to begin to decode the decorative mythology of the house and gardens.

The *Latona* image emerged after I discovered a frieze painting at Chatsworth. The painting is normally hidden away in a shadow opposite the bed in the State Apartments and none of the curators had noticed it before. They eventually worked out that one of the figures must be Latona because the rest of the frieze displays scenes from the life of Diana.

These were just some of the goddesses that appeared across your show. Can you tell us about the significance of the idea of the goddess for your work?

Well, my classical knowledge started to reignite for me when I started reading feminism in the '70s – which included literature about goddess worship. When I was sixteen, I began to read the books of the second-wave feminists, and to see images such as *God Giving Birth* by Monica Sjoo, in which God is depicted as a woman, and read M. Esther Harding's *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern*

and *Why Women Need the Goddess* by Carol P. Christ. But as well as great texts, you would see imagery, so you had images working on you at two levels textually and visually – and visual images are for me a great short-cut to the imagination.

And then I read *The Female Eunuch*. Before that, I had only known Germaine Greer on television in a comedy show called *Nice Time*, and my knowledge of her was that she was articulate, had impeccable comic timing and always looked great. Then I read her book, and my sixteen-year-old brain started melting down and rewiring...

So that's when I began to look again at classical ideas: the received ideas of mythology, reinterpreted through feminism, and through the writing of Jung, so they become political, too.

And it has shaped my work: I'm aware of the ways in which many of the images of women that I have used are related to classical images. For example, I can see the relationship between the poses of the glamour models in my pictures and those of the statues at Chatsworth; nothing really had changed that much. And it makes sense: in the 30s–70s, within the West, glamour photographers would probably have had a relatively classical education. But now I think that has changed: pornographic images of women are less concerned with narrative or with classical images, it's more about celebrity; a lot of the craft has gone.

And was your work *Pythia* influenced by the idea of the mysteries and power of women?

Pythia was already there. The snake I used was a homage to the Chatsworth snake – the motif is everywhere in Chatsworth, I had researched its origins back to Bess of Hardwick in the mid-sixteenth century, and I was also thinking about the serpent within world mythology; I knew the layers of myth around it. And my interest in the oracular was already there. I have always found the oracular interesting (my school-friends and I got into trouble for playing with a toy Ouija board).

Whilst making the photomontage, I tried the cut-out snake in various positions – I didn't want to put it on Georgiana's face! – but it kept gravitating back into that position. It seemed that it had to be.

I did something similar with *The Pretty Girls* series, as I concealed their faces: then I was often working with images of women whose real names we didn't know. There was always the odd moment, when I obscured their faces and thought – I'm the only person who knows what they look like under the glued motif. But the *Pythia*

is very different – the Maria Cosway portrait of Duchess Georgiana is the most popular image at Chatsworth, with the highest postcards and print sales; you can even get cushions. Everybody who comes to the house knows the painting, knows whose image is under the snake motif. But when the photomontage was shown at the Nottingham Contemporary Gallery, then it changed meaning; and it will change again when it travels further afield. There are potent images like these in every collection: the luxury for the artist is in being able to choose which one to work with.

There were objects and themes of the mantic and the magical throughout your exhibition: are you aware of them in your artistic process?

With *Pretty Girls*, and also with *Georgiana*, those images of women are magical in the sense that they are glamorous – and of course the original meaning of 'glamour' is a magical spell.

When I'm making an image, it's a very economic process. It's about letting the image undo it itself. There's very little you need to cut or add to make meanings fall apart. But I'm also always so aware of all the things that could have been in the *Pythia* montage. With *Pretty Girls*, with *Georgiana*, because I draw from a limited popular culture, I'm aware of all the women who are not there – because of skin tone and class, etc. – who are excluded from the image; who are not represented.

Without mystifying the creative process, it is quite trance-like. I like to immerse myself in music and fragrance while I work. It's beyond reason and beyond logic. It's like an ancient jigsaw-puzzle: the pieces come together and it's in harmony. There's a sense of time – *kairos* – and I always know when a piece is finished: it's become articulate, greater than the sum of its parts. And the images don't stop working: they don't have a sell-by date. Culture is multi-faceted and changing so rapidly – and the images get reinterpreted all the time.

So classical themes continue to be part of your work?

My latest work is a very ambitious commission for Art on the Underground: *The Bower of Bliss*. It comprises a collage of themes and a performance at Southwark Underground station. The title goes back to my time at Chatsworth, where you can see 'Queen Mary's Bower', which was allegedly built for Mary Queen of Scots so that she could exercise during her imprisonment there.

My research inspired a film of that name commis-

sioned by the Glasgow Women's Library which explored the relationship between Mary Queen of Scots and Bess of Hardwick. And now, linked to that, is my work for Art on the Underground: each Bower presents the idea of a safe and pleasurable space for women. Over the past months I have come to realize that bliss is a feminist issue, that we need to not only create safe spaces but that these spaces should be pleasurable to inhabit both underground and overground. There will soon be an additional motif glued to the billboards, it's a cut-out of a Roman flagon found nearby, the graffito on the flagon reads *LONDINI AD FANVM ISIDIS*, 'to the temple of Isis, London'; where the goddess leads, we must follow!

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